

Tales from the Hot Cold War

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Abstract

Unlike most of the world's film industries, the American system known as Hollywood has never been owned or operated by the national government. Instead, it has been privately owned from the earliest days. This does not mean, however, that Hollywood has been unaffected by the concerns and priorities of Washington, DC. Despite being twenty-seven hundred miles apart, the two cities have cooperated, and contended, on many occasions—especially during times of war. This essay explores the history of that relationship from the 1910s to the present.

Keywords: War War II films, Cold War films, Korean War films, Vietnam War films, Washington and Hollywood

What truth soldiers would speak/None would hear, and none repeat.

—Howard Lachtman

Despite being the world's most influential storyteller, Hollywood has rarely been good at dramatizing war. This essay examines this shortcoming through the lens of the *Washington-Hollywood Pact*, my term for the volatile but long-lasting partnership between America's government and its dream factory. The intention is to show how, from the earliest days of commercial filmmaking, changes in the American experience of war have shaped the way war has been dramatized by Hollywood—and to argue, through a consideration of specific films, that these changes have so altered the terms of the pact that it no longer represents the best interests of either partner.

The Origins of the Pact

The Washington-Hollywood Pact dates back to 1915, when a landmark decision by the US Supreme Court, *Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio*, defined film as “a business, pure and simple.” In effect, this decision denied First Amendment protection to the new medium, thereby exposing it to government censorship at the local, state, and federal levels. As a result, when the United States was preparing to enter World War I in 1917, the studios readily complied with president Woodrow Wilson’s request that they produce propaganda films in support of an unpopular war.

The word *propaganda* is not an exaggeration. The films that resulted were unsubtle in the extreme. Indeed, some took their cues from the British government’s efforts to stoke war fever by racializing Germans as “Huns” and fabricating reports of German atrocities in Belgium.¹ Newly relocated to Los Angeles from New York, the fledgling film industry was not yet called Hollywood. But by producing crude films like *Escaping the Hun* and *The Kaiser, the Beast of Berlin*, the studios committed themselves to the pact.

At war’s end, Washington rewarded Hollywood by permitting the studios to use aggressive tactics, like cartels and block booking, that were illegal at home but useful in cornering overseas markets. These tactics were not the only reason why America was able to replace France as the world’s leading film exporter by 1925. Hollywood movies were created to please a highly diverse domestic audience, so they traveled well (and still do). But without the pact, they might not have traveled so far so fast.

World War II bolstered the pact. Focused as usual on the bottom line, the studios sold movies to Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany right through

1. See Philip M. Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind*, 3rd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 196–97.

1939, ceasing only when Mussolini and Hitler banned all such imports. But as of December 1941, when imperial Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and Germany declared war on America, Hollywood stood ready to produce whatever Washington needed, from Frank Capra's army training films *Why We Fight*, made with an assist from Walt Disney, to hundreds of theatrical features supporting the war aims of America and its allies in more or less artistically successful ways.

With victory came unprecedented power for both partners. Through the Marshall Plan and other aid programs, Washington provided vital assistance to a number of war-torn countries, both allies and former foes, while attaching a proviso requiring the recipients to admit floods of Hollywood films. The films were donated by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) in the hope of prying open new markets. And the pressure to accept them was applied by the Departments of State and Defense in the hope that American-style entertainment would persuade foreign populations that American-style democracy was superior to fascism or communism.

Before war's end in 1944, this policy was set forth in a memo sent to the MPAA by the US Department of State: "In the post-war period, the Department desires to co-operate fully in the protection of American motion pictures abroad. It expects in return that the industry will co-operate wholeheartedly with the government with a view to ensuring that the pictures distributed abroad will reflect credit on the good name and reputation of this country and its institutions."² Rarely had the terms of the pact been spelled out so clearly. The tide of war was turning, and Hollywood shared Washington's urgent desire to defeat Hitler. But because victory was not yet assured, the memo's alignment of diplomatic and commercial priorities made sense to both partners.

2. Quoted in David Puttnam, *The Undeclared War* (London: Harper Collins, 1997), 212.

Three years later, that alignment made less sense. In 1947, amid rising tensions between the Soviet Union and its former allies America and Britain, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) began a series of hearings on Communist influence in the movie colony. A decade earlier, a similar committee had investigated Nazi influence, but with little result. This probe was different, because Hollywood had long had its share of Communists and fellow travelers.

In 1947, however, the leftists in Hollywood had reason to assume they were in good standing with Washington. This is because, back in 1941, when president Theodore Roosevelt's Office of War Information (OWI) urged the studios to shore up relations with America's new ally, the Soviet Union, by making pro-Soviet films, it was the leftists who most readily agreed.³ A salient example would be Howard Koch, a respected screenwriter best known today for his work on the 1942 classic *Casablanca*. In 1941, when the OWI urged Warner Bros. to make a pro-Soviet film based on the memoirs of Joseph E. Davies (who had served as US ambassador to the Soviet Union between 1936 and 1938), Jack Warner, the powerful head of that studio, asked Koch to write the script.

Koch agreed, only to regret it later. Davies's book, *Mission to Moscow*, was astoundingly credulous and naïve. But it was also a bestseller, so in order to secure the rights, Warner Bros. gave Davies complete creative control. The resulting film was a mess—part vanity project by Davies, part Stalinist propaganda. OWI called it “a magnificent contribution to the Government's motion picture program.”⁴ But the American public stayed away in droves; anti-Communist pundits denounced it as the work of the Kremlin; even the Soviet leadership disliked it. According to the US ambassador, who held a private screening of *Mission to Moscow* for Stalin and his inner circle, Stalin's cronies watched it with “glum curiosity” while the “Leader of Humanity”

3. Clayton R. Koppert and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War* (New York: Free Press, 1987), 10.

4. Quoted in Kristin Hunt, “Hollywood Codebreakers: Warner Brothers Embarks on a Disastrous ‘Mission to Moscow,’” *Medium*, April 20, 2018.

(a film buff when not ordering mass executions) “was heard to grunt once or twice.”⁵

It is therefore ironic that in 1947, when HUAC was holding its hearings, the same Jack Warner who had enlisted Koch to write *Mission to Moscow* gave the committee a list of eighteen “Commies” working in Hollywood that included Koch. When subpoenaed by HUAC, Koch vowed not to remain silent as others had but to defend his cooperation with the war effort. In the end, he was not called to testify, but in 1951 he was blacklisted. He found work in London, but others were less fortunate.⁶

There is some comfort in knowing that in wartime Hollywood, even the most committed Communists found it hard to tell Stalin-sized lies. Today, *Mission to Moscow* rests in the dustbin of history, along with the other pro-Soviet clunkers made at the time. On the scale of injustices committed during the twentieth century, the HUAC probe and the Hollywood blacklist are blips. But that has not stopped the movie colony from making more films about those incidents than about, say, the forced starvation of five million people in Soviet Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine between 1930 and 1933.

The First Hot War: Korea

When the Marshall Plan was launched in 1948, its two main goals, according to historian Thomas H. Guback, were “to strengthen faltering economies against risings from the left” and “to open and maintain markets for American films, . . . seen as propaganda vehicles for strengthening western European minds against pleas from the left.”⁷ In 1948 the Cold War was just

5. William H. Standley, telegram to the US Secretary of State, May 25, 1943. Quoted in Todd Bennett, “Culture, Power, and *Mission to Moscow*: Film and Soviet-American Relations during World War II,” *Journal of American History* (September 2001).

6. “Howard Koch,” Bard Archives and Special Collections, accessed October 15, 2022, <https://www.bard.edu/archives/voices/koch/koch.php>.

7. Thomas H. Guback, *The International Film Industry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969).

beginning, and by the terms of the pact, Hollywood would soon be playing its part by producing “propaganda vehicles” to support the anti-Communist cause.

Those terms were about to change, however. In June 1950, one hundred thousand North Korean troops crossed the 38th parallel into South Korea. The United Nations (UN) responded by sending a coalition force commanded by US Army general Douglas MacArthur, and the Cold War’s first hot war began. This was labeled a “police action” because it did not involve a formal declaration of war. But it was definitely a war: three years of bloody combat, ordeals of survival under unspeakably harsh conditions, dramatic reversals of fortune—all rich fodder for audience-pleasing movies.

Or so it would seem. But in fact, the Korean conflict was slow to inspire Hollywood. The first to address the topic was Samuel Fuller, a World War II veteran turned filmmaker, who in 1951 began to make gritty, low-budget films about Korea. First and most successful was *The Steel Helmet*, about a diverse group of US soldiers who unite against enemy efforts to defeat them not just militarily but psychologically by playing on their racial differences. Produced for \$104,000 in a Los Angeles park, with a plywood tank, a mist machine, and twenty-five UCLA students as extras, *The Steel Helmet* grossed over \$2 million.⁸

Two years later, the bestselling author James Michener published *The Bridges at Toko-Ri*, a novel drawing an emotional connection between World War II and Korean conflict. The main character, Lt. Harry Brubaker (William Holden), is a navy fighter-bomber pilot who, despite having flown many missions in the Pacific during World War II, has been called back to serve in Korea. He resents this, because as he tells an admiral who is about to give him a particularly dangerous mission, “I was one of the few, Admiral, at New Guinea, Leyte, Okinawa. Why does it have to be me again?”⁹

8. Samuel Fuller, *A Third Face* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 257–58.

9. Mark Robson, *The Bridges at Toko-Ri* (Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures, 1954). See also “The Bridges at Toko-Ri,” Scripts, accessed November 24, 2022, https://www.scripts.com/script.php?id=the_bridges_at_toko-ri_19853&cp=2.

Brubaker then expresses what many Americans, not just veterans, felt about Korea: “Militarily, this war is a tragedy. I think we ought to pull out.” The admiral replies with a pitch-perfect statement of the anti-Communist cause: “That’s rubbish, son, and you know it. If we did, they’d take Japan, Indochina, the Philippines. Where would you have us make our stand, the Mississippi?” This dialogue, followed by a powerfully realized film about the bombing of heavily fortified bridges in the mountains of North Korea, is precisely what Hollywood was expected to produce under the terms of the pact. But it’s important to remember that *The Bridges at Toko-Ri* could not have been made without the cooperation of the US Navy. In other words, Washington had a veto on this one.

The next major film about Korea, the 1959 battle piece *Pork Chop Hill*, is based on the true story of a US Army platoon being decimated by Chinese forces while trying to take control of an outpost marking the dividing line between North and South. In many ways the film harks back to the patriotic war films of the 1940s. But it also strikes an ambivalent note characteristic of the director, Lewis Milestone, who in 1930 had made his name with a screen adaptation of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Erich Maria Remarque’s pacifist novel about World War I.

In 1945, Milestone had also directed *A Walk in the Sun*, a portrait of US soldiers breaking down under pressure during the Allied invasion of Italy. To make such a film was a bold step, because while such “burnouts,” as they were called, were common in World War II, they rarely showed up in Hollywood films. According to General Harold K. Johnson, a survivor of the Bataan Death March and a Japanese POW camp, the fact that troops were in the war “for the duration . . . resulted in an enormous number of battlefield fatigue cases,” as soldiers “just break down under that kind of unremitting pressure.”¹⁰

10. Mark DePue, “Vietnam War: The Individual Rotation Policy,” *Vietnam Magazine*, December 2006.

Milestone was neither called before HUAC nor blacklisted. But he was “grey-listed,” or denied work because of his suspected Communist sympathies, which may help to explain his ambivalence in *Pork Chop Hill*. The film ends with a voice-over tribute to “those who fought there . . . millions live in freedom today because of what they did.” This echoes the *casus belli*—the “why we fight”—portrayed in hundreds of Hollywood World War II films: *We fight to defend democracy against Fascism*. But for Hollywood in the 1950s, the fight against *Communism* did not have the same resonance.

Further, it was clear in 1959 that the Korean conflict had been neither won nor lost, but rather frozen in place as part of the Cold War. What Hollywood needed now was a *casus belli* better suited to the times. *Pork Chop Hill* supplied it, in a comment by platoon commander Lt. Joe Clemons (Gregory Peck) to a fellow officer who asks if taking the hill had been worth it: “Worth what? It hasn’t much military value. I doubt if any American’d give you a dollar for it. Probably no Chinese’d give you two bits.” But then Clemons adds, “The value’s changed somehow, sometime. Maybe when the first man died.”¹¹

Unlike the voice-over, which affirms that *they fought to defend democracy against Communism*, this comment suggests a new *casus belli*: *They fought to justify and avenge the deaths of their comrades*. This is hardly a new idea. In Homer’s *Iliad*, Achilles refuses to fight after being insulted by the Greek leader Agamemnon, returning only when the Trojans kill his beloved friend Patroclus. In the heat of battle, soldiers do not think about long-range objectives; they think about their friends. And when they display courage, it is more out of loyalty to their friends, or fear of letting them down, than commitment to any abstract ideal. Sociologists call this “unit cohesion,” and no army can succeed without it. What is new in *Pork Chop Hill* is the notion that unit cohesion by itself might be a sufficient *casus belli*.

11. Lewis Milestone, *Pork Chop Hill* (Beverly Hills, CA: Melville Productions, 1959). See also “Pork Chop Hill (1959),” Movie Scripts, accessed November 24, 2022, <https://stockq.org/moviescript/P/pork-chop-hill.php>.

Solidarity among comrades is a vital ingredient in every World War II film made in Hollywood, from the earliest propaganda to recent gems like *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *Band of Brothers* (2001). In the context of that “good war,” it works well to foreground the tribulations of a small group of soldiers, because in the background there is always the struggle to defeat Hitler. Indeed, *Band of Brothers* includes an episode called “Why We Fight,” in which the burned-out, hardened soldiers in Easy Company find new purpose after stumbling upon a Nazi death camp. The scene is powerful but feels a bit didactic, because we already know why they fight.

This World War II formula of “comrades in the foreground, worthy cause in the background” also served to promote democracy by portraying American soldiers as ordinary citizens from diverse backgrounds (more diverse over time), who embody democratic virtues. The soldiers are not all heroic, but the ones we admire tend to fit a certain profile. They show respect, not slavish obedience, to their superior officers; they think and speak for themselves; they know when to follow orders and when to seize the initiative; and they do not hesitate to make the ultimate sacrifice when the cause of freedom requires it.

The Second Hot War: Vietnam

Between 1955, when America stepped in to support the South Vietnamese government after the defeat of the French colonial forces at Dien Bien Phu, and 1975, when Saigon fell to the combined forces of the Communist North, Hollywood struggled to find a compelling *casus belli* for America’s involvement in Vietnam. As a result, most of the relevant films were made after 1975, and the majority reflect the discontent, futility, and profound alienation that had come to be felt by all but its most ardent supporters.

It was different in the early 1960s, when young Americans marched off to Vietnam with visions of John Wayne dancing in their heads. This sounds like a cliché, but according to the distinguished British military historian

Richard Holmes, it was true. After citing numerous sources on this point, Holmes concludes that “middle-ranking infantry officers in Vietnam in the late 1960s would have been in their early teens when *The Sands of Iwo Jima* first appeared; it is, perhaps, not surprising that its impact was so tremendous.”¹² Thus, the first Hollywood film made about Vietnam was a John Wayne vehicle called *The Green Berets*.

Produced in the style of 1949, set in 1963 during the confident early phase of American involvement, and released into the havoc of 1968, *The Green Berets* landed with a resounding thud. In 1949 audiences had cheered at *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, especially the ending, which reenacts the famous photograph of US Marines raising the stars and stripes on Mount Suribachi (itself a reenactment, no photographer having been present when the event actually occurred). But in 1968 audiences jeered at *The Green Berets*, both for its general klutziiness and for filling the screen with incongruities such as the stealthy guerilla fighters of the Viet Cong marching in close formation, and the sun setting in the east.

More attuned to the mood of 1968 was Robert Altman’s *M*A*S*H* (1970), about three army surgeons who, when not up to their elbows in blood, amuse themselves by creating chaos for everyone around them. The film’s ostensible setting is a field hospital in Korea, but its popularity rested on the assumption that it was really about Vietnam. In 1970, when *M*A*S*H* was released (or, as Altman once quipped, when it “escaped”), the production studio, Twentieth Century Fox, was heavily invested in two high-prestige films, *Patton* and *Tora! Tora! Tora!*, about World War II. There were no films about Vietnam on the horizon, so when funky, low-budget *M*A*S*H* grossed millions more at the box office, Hollywood sat up and took notice.¹³

12. Richard Holmes, *Firing Line* (London: Pimlico, 1994).

13. *M*A*S*H* grossed \$81.6 million at the domestic box office, compared to *Patton* (\$62.5 million) and *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (\$29.5 million). The Numbers, “Weekend Predictions: Halloween Ends Eyes \$50-Million Opening,” Nash Information Services, October 14, 2022, <https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/>.

The late 1960s and early 1970s were the best of times for Hollywood, in the sense of finally gaining artistic freedom under the First Amendment. In 1968, after a series of Supreme Court decisions overturned the 1915 definition of film as “a business, pure and simple,” the MPAA dismantled the Production Code Authority (PCA), also known as the Hays Office, which the studios had created in the 1930s to ward off government censorship by a prerelease content-monitoring process. In the PCA’s stead, the MPAA set up the age-graded ratings system still in place today.

This new freedom nurtured countless brilliant films that could not have been made under the Production Code. But it also fostered an overreliance on explicit sex and graphic violence to enliven material that might otherwise hold scant interest. In the case of war films, more freedom meant rapid progress in the simulation of mayhem. No longer did soldiers topple gracefully when struck by imaginary bullets; the blood squib made it possible to show arterial spurting with every hit. No longer did exploding artillery shells toss rag-doll bodies into the air; latex and dye made it possible to show bursting heads, severed limbs, and random body parts raining down on both the quick and the dead.

One of the first Vietnam-related films, Martin Scorsese’s celebrated *Taxi Driver*, was released in 1975, when the troops had barely returned home. A fever dream of loneliness and paranoia in the filthy streets of mid-1970s Manhattan, the film stars Robert De Niro as Travis Bickle, a troubled loner suffering from insomnia, who passes his nights driving a taxi, visiting porn shops, and raging at the exploitation of teenaged prostitutes. Today this mental state is called post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD), and it was all too common among Vietnam veterans, for reasons discussed below.

But instead of a sympathetic portrait, the screenwriter Paul Schrader made Travis a bloodthirsty psychopath. Why did Schrader do that? Possibly he was inspired by *Targets*, Peter Bogdanovich’s directorial debut. Released in 1968, the same year as *The Green Berets*, *Targets* is loosely based on the story of mass shooter Charles Whitman, who in 1966 killed fourteen people on the University of Texas’s Austin campus. Whitman was clearly suffering

from mental illness. But for good measure, and perhaps as a riposte to John Wayne, Bogdanovich made his fictionalized shooter a Vietnam vet.

Around the same time, Schrader wrote the script for another film, *Rolling Thunder* (1977), which likewise combines state-of-the-art gore with a lead character who after being traumatized in Vietnam becomes a ticking time bomb. About these choices, we need not wonder. In the late 1970s, a blood-drenched film about a mere killer or psychopath might have been scary and depressing, but it would not have set the world thrumming with speculation about the filmmaker's intentions and debate about the deeper political significance of every frame. Make that character an American who fought in Vietnam, and the thrumming would go on for decades.¹⁴

Gimme (Tax) Shelter

Earlier I suggested that the late 1960s and early 1970s were the best of times for Hollywood as it achieved a long-sought degree of artistic freedom. But those years were also the worst of times, because the major studios were hemorrhaging money on lavish musicals and other old-fashioned movies that, to say the least, failed to resonate with domestic audiences deeply divided over the Vietnam war, campus protests, urban riots, and political assassinations. The studios badly needed bailouts from Washington. But given their lack of enthusiasm for the government's anti-Communist cause, was it reasonable of them to expect such help?

Surprisingly, it was. This is because Washington and Hollywood are like an old married couple who quarrel at home but are deeply united in their outward-facing dealings with the world. As the war in Vietnam escalated, and Hollywood stopped making films like *The Green Berets* and began

14. In passing, I should mention that *The Ninth Configuration* (1979), written and directed by William Peter Blatty, also features a traumatized vet. But as part of a trilogy exploring questions of good and evil, faith and nihilism, the film contains very little violence and has no political agenda to speak of.

making the kind that portray US soldiers as dangerous killers, Washington did not flinch. On the contrary, it behaved like a loyal spouse who will do anything to save a bad marriage.

For example, in 1969, Congress, with the support of the Nixon administration, began to offer tax credits to the studios, enabling them to set up lucrative profit shelters for wealthy investors. Two years later, the 1971 Revenue Act allowed the studios to deduct 7 percent (subsequently 10 percent) of production investment from their overall corporate tax (up to a 50 percent limit) and to carry that forward for seven years. Further sweetening the deal was the outcome of a lawsuit brought by Disney that made the measure retroactive to 1962.¹⁵ As Alan Hirschfield, then president of Columbia Pictures, subsequently testified before Congress, “The availability of this kind of financing is the single most important occurrence in the recent history of the industry.”¹⁶

This Washington help was also “not without a touch of irony,” writes filmmaker and former Columbia CEO David Puttnam, because “for years, the studios had fulminated against the preferential tax incentives for film production offered by *foreign* governments” (emphasis added). The irony is further compounded by the benefit these legislative favors conferred on the so-called American New Wave in the 1970s. As Puttnam observes, many of the more “bold and adventurous” films of that decade, including *Taxi Driver*, “were financed using tax shelter money.”¹⁷

Coincidence is not cause, but this help from Washington was followed by a series of films pushing back against the negative stereotype of Vietnam vets as ticking time bombs. In *Coming Home* (1978), a marine wife (Jane Fonda) falls in love with a paraplegic vet (Jon Voigt) while her marine captain husband (Bruce Dern) is serving in Vietnam. A love triangle set in sunny California, the film expresses considerable sympathy for wounded and traumatized

15. David Puttnam, *The Undeclared War* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 267.

16. Quoted in David A. Cook, *Lost Illusions*, vol. 9: *History of the American Cinema*, ed. Charles Harpole (New York: Scribner's, 2000), 12–13.

17. Puttnam, *The Undeclared War*, 268–69.

veterans—as long as they share Fonda's and her fellow filmmakers' view of the war as criminal aggression against a peace-loving Asian nation.

More subtle is Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*, which won the 1978 Oscar for Best Picture, bestowed upon the director and his team by none other than John Wayne, in his last public appearance. It is a remarkable film, starring Robert De Niro as Michael, one of three blue-collar grunts from western Pennsylvania who are captured by Viet Cong and forced to play Russian roulette for their captors' sadistic pleasure. Michael's friends break down, but he holds out long enough to engineer an escape. Michael's courage and loyalty are a welcome change from the deranged stereotype. But for all its virtues, *The Deer Hunter* evades the question of whether unit cohesion can survive without a compelling *casus belli*. The main characters were buddies long before Vietnam, and while the other two can clearly count on Michael, there are no scenes of combat to test whether Michael can count on *them*.

In 1979 a very different film appeared, *Apocalypse Now*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola and purportedly based on *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad's 1899 novella about the degradation of human nature in the Belgian Congo, which under the rule of King Leopold II was the most nightmarish colony in Africa. Without launching into a proper comparison, I will say that the film neglects the deeper meaning of the novella, which is that absolute power destroys both the powerful and the weak, and instead focuses on the surface plot of a civilized European going rogue among "savages." Needless to say, this plot is an awkward fit with the American war in Vietnam, which even at its nadir did not involve any jungle despotisms in which white men were worshiped as gods by the "natives."

Dereliction of Duty

Apocalypse Now widened the gap between the facile anti-war sentiment in Hollywood and the complex emotions of millions of Americans who had supported the war and seen their loved ones bear the brunt of its savagery,

only to be scarred by defeat and disrespect. For that audience, a more relevant film was *Go Tell the Spartans* (1978), based on a fictionalized account of a disastrous US Special Forces mission to the Central Highlands in 1964. In the words of a reporter who accompanied that mission, the unit leaders were “admirably trained and motivated,” but the orders they were given showed zero forethought and caused the deaths of too many good men.¹⁸

Go Tell the Spartans did respectably at the box office, but its message—that the real problem in Vietnam was dereliction of duty higher up in the chain of command—got lost in the noise of a rapidly polarizing America.¹⁹ In 1982, that message exploded onto the screen in the hugely popular character of Rambo, a maverick super-warrior whose main battles are with US military and law enforcement. In *Rambo: First Blood*, the first of five films starring Sylvester Stallone, the allure of big weapons and loud explosions is reinforced by a darker, more compelling theme: the resentment of veterans toward Washington for having failed (in Rambo’s words) to “let us win.”

Actually, Rambo says “let *me* win,” which speaks volumes about the legacy of Vietnam. Rambo is a solo act, more comic-book hero than real-life soldier, and his extreme individualism is not a remedy for what went wrong in Vietnam—it is a symptom. From the veterans’ perspective, one of the worst aspects of service in Vietnam was the policy of “individual rotation,” which instead of training and supporting small and cohesive combat units moved individuals in and out of the field in a manner that seemed deliberately designed to prevent much-needed friendship and trust.

18. Daniel Ford, *The Only War We’ve Got: Early Days in South Vietnam* (Durham, NH: Warbird Books, 2012), <https://www.warbirdforum.com/onlywar.htm>.

19. *Dereliction of Duty* is of course the title of US Army lieutenant general H. R. McMaster’s 1997 book blaming America’s defeat on two successive presidents, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, and their top military and civilian advisors, who led the country into a conflagration that lasted twenty years, cost \$139 billion (by official estimate; the true figure is doubtless much larger), and resulted in the deaths of fifty-eight thousand American soldiers, two hundred and fifty thousand South Vietnamese soldiers, five thousand soldiers from US-allied nations, 1.1 million North Vietnamese and Viet Cong fighters, and two million civilians.

The reasons for this policy were many. President Lyndon Johnson did not want to call up the US Reserves and the National Guard, because that would have required Congress to debate the war instead of his social-welfare agenda. The junior officers, focused as they were on the Cold War in Europe, needed heat-of-battle experience to further their careers. The Selective Service legislation limited the tour of duty required of a draftee to two years, which, because of the time spent in training, effectively meant one year. And the senior command, mindful of the burnout issue in World War II, hoped to improve morale by letting every soldier know the end date of his tour. Taken separately, these reasons made sense. But taken together, they led to disaster. As stated in *Vietnam Magazine*, “The quintessentially American emphasis on the individual had replaced the soldier’s ethos of selfless service, an ethos that called for soldiers to subordinate their own selfish interests to the welfare of the group.”²⁰

The Cold War ended in 1989, and it was during the preceding few years that Hollywood came closest to getting Vietnam right. The first film to dramatize the destructive effects of the individual rotation policy was Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* (1986), praised by vets for its intense evocation not only of combat but of the discomfort caused by everything from monsoons to mosquitoes. The story begins with the arrival of Chris (Charlie Sheen), a fresh-faced “cherry” lieutenant whose inexperience puts him at the mercy of two sergeants: cruel, racist, scar-faced Barnes (Tom Berenger) and kindly, wise, graceful Elias (Willem Defoe).

Stone’s films are not known for their moral complexity, so Barnes gets all the nasty jobs, such as interrogating terrified villagers, while Elias gets all the nice ones, such as tracking North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regulars through the sun-dappled greenwood. The soldiers also divide along the same tidy lines, with the bigoted whites sharing Barnes’s taste for booze and killing and the soulful blacks smoking herb with Elias and questioning why they are there. Overall, *Platoon* is a gripping film that deserves credit for accurately

20. DePue, “Vietnam War.”

portraying the problem of rotating command. But it is also propaganda in the sense of blurring the distinction between soldierly discontent with the way the war is being fought and political opposition to its larger purpose.

A similar sleight of hand occurs in *Full Metal Jacket*, Stanley Kubrick's 1987 film about a platoon of US Marines slogging their way through Da Nang and Hue during the 1968 Tet Offensive. Based largely on *The Short-Timers*, a profane, hard-bitten, terrifying novella by war correspondent Gustav Hasford, the film centers on the relationship between two US Marines: a reporter-turned-soldier nicknamed "Joker" (Matthew Modine) and his levelheaded Texan friend "Cowboy" (Arliss Howard). Having bonded in boot camp against a sadistic drill sergeant, the two have each other's backs through long battles in streets blasted by artillery and split by merciless sniper fire. Toward the end, Cowboy is shot by a sniper, and Joker braves a hail of bullets to embrace him before he dies.

This scene is quite moving, and it reflects the finest ideals of unit cohesion in the US Marine Corps. But it is also surprisingly sentimental compared to the ending of Hasford's novella, which takes place in the rugged hills surrounding the US Marine base at Khe Sanh. In Hasford's telling, Joker, Cowboy, and the other members of a small patrol are ambushed by an invisible NVA force. The point man is wounded, and the others must choose between trying to retrieve him, which will result in their being massacred, or abandoning him to save themselves. The situation goes from bad to worse when Joker takes the initiative by blowing his friend Cowboy's brains out.

It is an ugly act that resonates all too well with the title of Hasford's novella: in Vietnam, a "short-timer" was a draftee looking forward to the designated end of his tour. So, the shorter the time, the more likely the soldier will sever the bonds between him and his comrades in arms. Stanley Kubrick was hardly a squeamish director. But this horrifying moment was too strong for his stomach, it seems.

The best film about Vietnam is John Irvin's *Hamburger Hill* (1987), about two divisions of the US Army's Third Battalion trying to seize a mountain ridge in the Central Highlands that is being held by the NVA.

Designated Hill 937 by their officers, the ridge has been dubbed Hamburger Hill by the soldiers, in commemoration of its Korean predecessor, Pork Chop Hill. The final assault, in May 1969, is generally considered to have been a tactical disaster. Equal to its immediate predecessors in terms of vivid action and compelling performances, *Hamburger Hill* is far superior in terms of its portrayal of the war.

To begin, the film highlights the morale-destroying impact of the individual rotation policy, but without trying to equate the soldiers' objections to that policy with political opposition to the war itself. Similarly, we see the headache caused by the arrival of a new batch of FNGs ("fucking new guys"), but we also see how the seasoned unit leader, Adam Frantz (Dylan McDermott), manages to train them on the spot. Further, the film shows how intensely the soldiers hate the order to keep assaulting the hill no matter what. But it does not confound that hatred with any political view. Instead, the soldiers' bitterness toward the ineptness of the "brass" is offset by their resentment toward anti-war protestors who hurl insults at them. And in one scene, Frantz tells an arrogant TV reporter that he has more respect for the NVA than for the media.

I could go on. *Hamburger Hill* does not divide its cast of characters into good guys and bad, depending on their politics. Nor does it automatically ascribe anti-war sentiments to black soldiers objecting to racist treatment in the military. But by now, my drift should be clear: with this superb, powerful film, Hollywood finally got Vietnam right.

Lessons Learned

"Lessons learned" is military talk for not making the same mistake twice. There are two lessons to be drawn from this history. The first is that unit cohesion is not an adequate substitute for a genuine *casus belli*. When the bullets are whizzing past, it may be dramatically necessary (and sociologically accurate) to show soldiers putting comradeship before cause. But the

two are not that easily separated. At some point the shooting stops, and the soldiers ponder why they fight. If no adequate reason presents itself, they grow less willing to walk back into hell.

The second lesson, not yet learned, is that the Washington-Hollywood Pact needs repair. As I have been arguing, the depiction of war in Hollywood films changed dramatically when America's hot war against Fascism ended and its Cold War against Communism began. The original terms of the pact called for the government to support the production and export of Hollywood films in exchange for an assurance that "the pictures distributed abroad will reflect credit on the good name and reputation of this country and its institutions." By the end of the Vietnam era, this two-way covenant in support of both patriotism and profit had devolved into a one-way extortion devoted exclusively to profit.

Today, this is even more the case. Indeed, when it comes to the export of American films to the rest of the world, Hollywood and Washington both act as though it were still 1915 and the film industry was "a business, pure and simple." Since the Cold War ended, there have been numerous attempts by France, Canada, and various allies to carve out a "cultural exception" to the free-trade ethos of the World Trade Organization. To these efforts Washington's response has never wavered: all such claims are illegitimate, because there is no meaningful distinction between trade in commodities and trade in cultural expression. To create a film is the same as to manufacture a widget.

In America, it took a lengthy legal battle to redefine film as a form of artistic expression deserving of First Amendment protection. And the result is a greater degree of creative freedom for post-1960s Hollywood than for any other film industry on Earth. All the more ironic, then, to see both partners to the pact agreeing supinely to let the Chinese Communist Party assume ever more control over the production, content, and distribution of American films in China. In the cogent summary of a recent report from PEN America: "Hollywood is one of the world's most significant storytelling centers, a cinematic powerhouse whose movies are watched by millions

across the globe. And yet the choices it makes, about which stories to tell and how to tell them, are increasingly influenced by an autocratic government with the world's most comprehensive system of state-imposed censorship."²¹ Today, of course, audiences everywhere are migrating away from theaters and broadcast outlets toward online streaming. But the digital age is not going to restore freedom of expression to Hollywood. Chinese film companies no longer need US help in producing domestic entertainment, including jingoistic war films in which American mercenaries (not soldiers—yet) are cast as the enemy. And Chinese tech companies have all the resources they need to combine social media and streaming services with state-of-the-art censorship, surveillance, and propaganda.

Faced with this situation, Washington and Hollywood have a choice. They can continue to sacrifice their independence for an ever-shrinking share of the Chinese market. Or they can do humanity a favor and reaffirm the artistic freedom that has long been the source of their global appeal. From my vantage point as an admirer of Hollywood's imperfect but creative efforts to portray the hottest and deadliest conflicts of the Cold War, I recommend the latter.

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21. James Tager with Jonathan Landreth, *Made in Hollywood, Censored by Beijing* (New York: PEN America, 2021), <https://pen.org/report/made-in-hollywood-censored-by-beijing/>.